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While Director of Social Services, I contracted for an evaluation of the need for an emergency shelter for children in Shasta County. The evaluation concluded that Shasta County should continue with its current model of using foster parents to provide temporary shelter for children removed from their homes. I asked the author of the evaluation to describe her most compelling reason for recommending against a children's shelter. She replied that on two occasions, when leaving shelters she had visited, she was overcome by sadness and tears; a response to the thought of her newborn twin granddaughters having to stay in one those facilities.

This story highlights the disturbing reality that while our present child welfare system consumes enormous resources, it fails to adequately care for children. For the most part, this system ignores the developmental needs of the children it allegedly serves and seems designed to meet the needs of the adults in the bureaucracy. It is not a system in which anyone would want their child or grandchild to become involved.

Legally and fiscally, the foster care system is embedded in the old welfare system, with all the bureaucratic red tape and stigma associated with that system. The focus is on accounting for dollars, meaningless rules that measure nothing, and with no accountability for the outcome or impact on the child. The heart of the system, in California, is the Division 31 regulations, which govern the amount and types of services provided a child in foster care. These regulations rely on a "unit of services" approach rather than a "outcome measures" approach. For example, the regulations prescribe the number of visits made to a child in foster care, not the child's wellbeing. It would be as if we, as parents, counted the number of days our children are in school, but ignored their failing grades.

Goals of Foster Care

The stated goals of foster care are the temporary care for children, while attempting to reunite the child and parent. Failing reunification the goal is to place children in a permanent setting, such as adoption or guardianship.

The degree to which these goals are met can be, and often is, very different in each of the 58 counties in California. The point at which children are judged "in danger" is different, the rate of removal is different, the length of time in care varies, and the rate of permanent placement varies greatly. In reality, we have 58 different child welfare systems in California.

By any measure available, the current foster care system is a, well documented, abysmal failure. What a shameful legacy we leave when after expending billions of dollars on nearly 100,000 children in care in California, they are still subjected to frequent and unnecessary moves, injury and death, inadequate medical and psychological care, and a complete lack of preparation for survival as adults. The tragedy doesn't end there, as youth leaving foster care, frequently look forward to drug addiction, mental health problems, lack of employment opportunities, and most of all, hopelessness.

We need to ask ourselves, why we are willing to accept the absurdly low standards of the current foster care system; more importantly, would we want our own children to be placed in foster care in California?

The citizens and the political representatives of the State of California have a moral and ethical responsibility to reform this costly and ineffective system. Additionally, the leaders and administrators need to acknowledge that a child welfare system, no matter how richly funded, can never replace a family.

Barriers to Children and Parents

One of the most daunting barriers to families ensnared in the system, is the balkanized design of the service delivery system. The fragmentation of services to families is evident by the number of various agencies that frequently have a segment of responsibility for a family and a child. For example, a family ensnared in the child welfare system is likely to be involved with the following professionals:

- child protective services worker
- income maintenance eligibility worker
- public health nurse
- probation officer
- court appointed attorney
- drug and alcohol counselor
- mental health clinician
- teacher

Can you imagine how difficult it must be reaching all of these busy professionals, much less arranging an appointment. The coordination of professional resources creates one of the greatest challenges to quality and quantity of child welfare services. The challenge, is not only connecting, but bringing to bear the resources of these large, complex organizations to assist the children and families.

The tragic irony of the child welfare system is that there are too many systems, which provide too many ill-defined services to children. The parents and children in need of services, as well as the professionals providing services, are often confused; thus, we fail to use services to their best advantage.

The primary reason for the fragmentation of services is, of course, the way the system is funded and consequently, organized. The greatest challenge as a county director of social services is to understand the funding sources available to your agency. While this seems at times an impossible task, it is more difficult to understand the funding mechanisms of the other primary providers that assist children and families. Thus, we perpetuate a system that is poorly understood by consumers and professionals, alike. How can we expect a chaotic, fragmented, and confusing system to meet the physical, emotional, educational, health needs of children and families?

It would be informative to quantify this confusion and lack of organization, by determining the aggregate costs of foster care services. For example, we need to determine the costs associated with medical care, education, mental health treatment, alcohol and drug treatment, Juvenile Court intervention. We could then use that information to make a rational judgment regarding the cost effectiveness of the current system. It would also reveal the total resources available for the redesign of the existing system. I suspect the total cost of foster care is a staggering sum. I am convinced that there are, nearly, sufficient existing resources, currently in place to provide a dramatically improved child welfare system in California.

Influence of youth, families, public

The most significant potential to improve the child welfare system lies with the California Youth Connection (CYC). It is the brightest ray or hope for change I have observed in the past thirty years. I hope that state and county agencies will give the necessary encouragement and support to ensure the success of CYC.

I nstead of marginalizing foster youth we must include them in the process of healing and growing. We honor people when we engage them in the helping process, and CYC provides us with a wonderful opportunity to include foster youth in their own growth and development.

Youth are marginalized when we limit their activities and experiences to the traditional array of child welfare services. There is more to healing and growing, than time with a counselor, therapist, caseworker, probation officer or attorney. There are intrinsically healthy experiences that we as parents expect, and hopefully demand, for our own children. Foster youth must have those experiences in order to grow and develop.

One of the most intrusive, disruptive and traumatic actions society can take against a family is to remove children. The decision should be made by a multidisciplinary committee with the experience and expertise to insure that this severe societal action is the best decision for the children and families. Each community should be required to establish a Child Welfare Advisory Committee to serve as a policy development body that represents the requisite expertise.

The Ideal Foster Care System

- ✧ Adopt the same standards for foster children that we embrace for our own children.
 - ✓ good health
 - ✓ progress in school
 - ✓ safe environment
 - ✓ out of trouble
 - ✓ stable and consistent environment
 - ✓ friends and interests
- ✧ Create a new Department of Children's Services with the same status as the Department of Social Services, Health Services or the Department of Child Support within the Health and Welfare Agency for the State of California.
- ✧ Require counties to establish a Department of Children's Services, separate from county welfare departments
- ✧ Fund prevention programs through the private non-profit sector, thus to diverting children from the foster care system

- ✧ Fund Senate Bill 2030 staffing guidelines for the new Department of Children's Services
- ✧ Replace the Division 31 regulations with the Federally developed National Standards for foster care.
- ✧ Adopt the concept of shared responsibility for foster youth. For example, the cost of foster care should be shared, equally, by county departments of Social Services, Mental Health, Public Health and Office of Education.
- ✧ Institutionalize the philosophy that, the less time children are in foster care the better off they are; therefore, good practice and cost savings are not incongruent.
- ✧ Create advisory boards, at the state level and in each county, of foster youth, emancipated foster youth, citizens, foster parents, and human services professionals, to guide the new Department of Children's Services
- ✧ Create One-stop Centers that contain all the resources needed by foster children and their families and are regionally located. These centers to be staffed and managed by child welfare advocates, i.e., social workers, public health nurses, mental health/drug and alcohol practitioners, etc.
- ✧ Department of Children's Services would reward successful outcomes

Some thoughts on organizations

"It is strange perhaps to realize that most people have a desire to love their organizations. They love the purpose of their school, their community agency, their business. They fall in love with the identity that is trying to be expressed. They connect to the founding vision. They organize to create a different world.

But then we take this vital passion and institutionalize it. We create an organization. The people who loved the purpose grow to disdain the institution that was created to fulfill it. Passion mutates into procedures, into rules and roles. Instead of purpose, we focus on policies. Instead of being free to create, we

impose constraints that squeeze the life out of us. The organization no longer lives. We see its bloated form and resent it for what it stops us from doing.

Too often organizations destroy our desires. They insist on their own imperatives. They forget we are self-organizing. Sometimes, so do we."

A simpler way

Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers